Loretta Lorance

**Becoming Bucky Fuller**


7 color and 59 b/w illus. $29.95,
ISBN 9780262123020

*Becoming Bucky Fuller* tells the story of Richard Buckminster Fuller’s (1895–1983) earliest forays into industrial mass housing, from being recruited in 1922 by his father-in-law, James Monroe Hewlett, to work with Stockade Buildings Systems, Inc., to his launching of the Dymaxion House and ongoing promotion of this project in the late 1920s and ’30s. More specifically, and more provocatively, Loretta Lorance re-tells this story, diligently reconstructing the evidence of an alternative to the now-legendary tale of Fuller’s 1927 epiphany while contemplating suicide on the shore of Lake Michigan. Having recently been ousted from his position as president of Stockade’s Midwest Corporation, and beset by financial pressures arising from the birth of a second daughter, Fuller, so the story goes, experienced something of a spiritual awakening: he came to understand that his life belonged to the universe and had great significance—that even as a lone and penniless individual he could improve the wellbeing of all of humanity. Out of this revelation crystallized his utopian vision for an efficient, healthy, and universal mode of industrially produced dwelling, the Dymaxion House. First recounted by Fuller himself in the late 1930s, this semi-fictional tale of misfortune and heroic recovery has been reiterated by official biographers such as Robert Marks, by Fuller’s son-in-law, Robert Synder, and by numerous others.¹

The importance of *Becoming Bucky Fuller* lies in the precision and detail with which Lorance’s “parallel history” debunks this myth through tracing extensive archival documentation of the minutiae of his daily life and work. Indeed, it is a rather curious and pleasurable book to read, not only on account of the intriguing twists it adds to a well-known story, but for its peculiar deployment of archival evidence (which at times reads almost like raw documentary material). Each chapter is cast as an episode within this demystification, using correspondence and other material collected within the early sections of the massive
Dymaxion Chronofile (a 750-volume record of Fuller’s life, initiated by him in 1907 and organized in chronological order) to systematically revise key details of Fuller’s heroic tale of the visionary loner working against a system bent on crushing innovation in the housing industry. What emerges in its place is a convincing account of Fuller earnestly, and almost desperately, seeking to establish a financially successful corporation dedicated to the business of patenting, promoting, and selling mass housing. To this end, chapters discuss his early involvement with Stockade, his independently conceived and marketed Fuller and 4D houses, his unsuccessful attempts to gain AIA support for his unconventional ideas, and the emergence of the Dymaxion concept in 1929. Despite his best efforts, Fuller failed to get a Dymaxion prototype exhibited at the 1933 Century of Progress fair in Chicago. Lorance concludes that it was “failures” such as this, and of his corporate strategy more generally, that led in the late 1930s to the recasting of the Dymaxion House as a futuristic vision, and with it, the recasting of Fuller the businessman as the visionary “Bucky.”

Lorance’s tracing of this early period of Fuller’s career maintains a singular focus—an achievement of sorts given the epic and labyrinthine nature of Fuller’s archive and the extensive and growing body of literature on him. I would not question the necessity of demarcating boundaries for a historical project, especially when faced with a “comprehensivist” like Fuller, who collected literally every trace of his existence. Yet aspects of Lorance’s demarcation raise critical questions regarding the nature of historical scholarship. For instance, the author makes only the most cursory acknowledgment of secondary literature, a particularly strange decision given the book’s provenance in her doctoral dissertation (CUNY, 2004).2 She does mention Richard Hamilton’s unpublished biography and earlier dissertations by Yunn Chii Wong (MIT, 1999) and Karl Conrad (University of Texas at Austin, 1974), but only to note their conformance with extant narratives (xii). Rebutting the approach of other unnamed scholars who visited the archive but “elected to fit the information the papers contain into the accepted narrative with few modifications,” her own project is cast as having a different relation to those facts: “The texts are allowed to ‘speak’ for themselves,” she claims (xiii). That is, they are assumed to be fully transparent, and hence the story, even if modified, implicitly positions Fuller as the controlling voice—this time through his construction of an archive of his life, itself the largest project he undertook. Comprising 1,400 linear feet of material, 1,700 hours of audio, film, and video recordings, among other documents, this remarkable personal archive was acquired by the Stanford University Libraries in 1999. Its availability to scholars marked an important event, one that will continue to allow research and the revisiting of the historical significance of a character who self-identified as a symptom of the accelerating and multiplying forces of modernity.

Yet archival texts do not simply speak for themselves, even if we try to let them do so. As Achille Mbembe reminds us, there are subjective, institutional, political, and historical factors informing any such revisiting: “who owns them . . . the political context in which they are visited; the distance between what is sought and what is found . . . the manner in which they are decoded,” all affect the valence of such a revisiting.1 The historical and discursive context from which, and into which, such a book as Lorance’s is launched is also significant, as her own engagement with the “personal myth” implicitly makes clear. What then, we might ask, motivates this research beyond getting the facts straight and offering us a reason for Fuller’s initiation of such a myth (both important contributions)? Why did so many of Fuller’s interpreters reiterate the myth? If the earlier lack of access to the archive was a necessary but insufficient key to this mystery of recursivity, what else does the book tell us about historical methodology and working with archives? Given the retrospective importance of Anne Hewlett Fuller’s diaries to unstitching her husband’s tightly woven tale, why was she not mobilized as a protagonist toward a feminist analysis? What, furthermore, does Lorance’s project offer to the discipline’s ongoing questioning of biography? I raise these questions since I was left wondering what the author hoped to contribute to the field. A testament to the importance of archival research, her book offers a strange model, one lacking in discursivity and stakes. The strangeness of this book is perhaps best highlighted when read in conjunction with a recent, archive-based essay on the same subject by Barry Katz, which concisely deconstructs Fuller’s myth with a critical voice and writerly touch largely absent from Lorance’s account.4 This is not to undercut the importance of Becoming Bucky Fuller, which sets out important new evidence, but to stress the multiple registers in which historical scholarship might operate.

**FELICITY D. SCOTT**

Columbia University

---

**NOTES**


